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Author(s)	**Deneen, CC**
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ASSESSMENT CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE IMPACT OF A HIDDEN ASSESSMENT CULTURE

Christopher Chares Deneen, University of Hong Kong
Deneen@hku.hk

Abstract: Change management in higher education is a complex and demanding process. This is especially true for initiating and managing change in assessment. Understanding assessment change in higher education is a developing field; only recently and to a limited extent has research begun taking into account dialogue among stakeholders and the change-relevant information such dialogues may reveal about institutional culture. This paper discusses findings from an institute-wide assessment change initiative. The initiative involved 35 instructors, 672 students and six developers. Data was collected initially from survey instruments, then later developer notes and relevant policy documents. Analysis was both qualitative and quantitative. Initial ANOVA was conducted both on an item and factor basis; leading to a focused qualitative analysis of materials generated in the context of developer and instructor activities. Initial findings included significant disparity between student and staff valuing of assessment change. Later findings included the emergence of levels of dialogue which in turn revealed different responses to assessment change, some overt, some covert. Findings and implications are contextualized in light of research on change management in higher education; implications for higher education institutions managing assessment change are discussed.

Key phrases: Assessment change, higher education, professional development, institutional culture

INTRODUCTION:

While the need to achieve enhanced practices in higher education is generally acknowledged, achieving change in classroom assessment practice is of special importance (McInnis, 2006; Nicol & Draper, 2009; Trowler & Bamber, 2005). Despite any number of reasons for enhancing assessment in higher education, it remains one of the hardest if not the hardest area in which to achieve change (Macdonald & Joughin, 2009). Because achieving change remains elusive despite our efforts to understand and model assessment change, we may ask, are we missing key understandings of what it takes to enhance assessment in higher education? It is generally recognized that improving higher education learning experiences is desirable (McInnis, 2006; Nicol & Draper, 2009; Trowler & Bamber, 2005). There is ample reason to attempt such changes. As students face increasingly complex lifelong and career long challenges, higher education institutions have increasingly seen themselves and the learning experiences they provide as meeting these needs (Barrie, 2007). Assessments are increasingly being positioned as means to understanding the degree to which students are achieving enhanced outcomes within and across disciplines (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Institutions are also facing increasing pressure both internally and externally to utilize data directly related to the student learning experience as indicators of quality (McInnis, 2006; Nicol & Draper, 2009; QAAE, 2003). Metrics related to publishing, external grant acquisition, etc. are increasingly sharing space with indicators of quality learning

experiences. The area of assessment then is of special concern as it may provide some of the richest evidence for internal and external processes.

Enhancing students experience with assessment is, then of special concern for a number of reasons. First there is the potential for assessment to foster enhanced learning (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Carless, 2009; Carless et al., 2011). Second, there is the critical issue of determining the degree to which learning is taking place; as learning experiences grow in sophistication, understanding the degree to which students have learned valued and sophisticated outcomes become critical. Subsequently, making fine-grained distinctions of achievement demands more sophisticated assessment tasks and means of interpretation.

Despite strong impetus for change, assessment remains the least enhanced area in higher education students learning experience (QAAE, 2003). Some of the reasons for this may relate to the broader challenges in achieving change in higher education learning. Some, like preconceptions that stakeholders hold about testing, evaluation, feedback etc. may be specific to assessment (Brown, 2009, 20011). However, some may relate to an area not as closely examined in achieving assessment change: dialogue. The role of dialogue in in higher education environments is generally recognized as an important area(Light, Calkins, & Cox, 2009); McFarlane, 2012) and of specific importance in professional development (McInnis, 2006). Dialogue at different layers of an institution may exhibit different relationships to change and assessment change. Institutional cultures are layered phenomena with change propagating differently at different layers (Trowler, 2005; Trowler & Bamber, 2005; Trowler, Fanghanel, & Wareham, 2005).

Dialogue at different layers of an institution may exhibit different relationships to change and assessment change. What has not been explored as fully is how dialogue may just like institutional culture, exist in different layers within an institution and how, in an attempt to change assessment, these layers of dialogue may exhibit crucial and unique properties that affect assessment change, give us insights into hidden culture in assessment and give insight into the change process.

This paper seeks to explore the role of dialogue in assessment change through analyzing dialogues around assessment change within a large-scale professional development project at an institution of higher education in Hong Kong. The aim of this project was to create an institution-wide trial for enhancing teaching, learning, assessment and planning (TLAP). This paper looks specifically at change in assessment. Internally, there was a standing recognition of challenges in the area of assessment based on a historical understanding of a need to enhance the classroom assessment practices of the institution (Carless, 2006).There were external reasons as well, familiar to any higher education institution or change agent who has been involved in such a change. The University Grants Committee of Hong Kong, like many of the external boards and institutions throughout the world is placing increased pressure on universities in Hong Kong to visibly improve higher education classroom practices, especially in the area of assessment (UGC, 2010).

To accomplish this understanding, the article is organized in the following way: a discussion is introduced around relevant literature and research concerning assessment change. A local context is developed, which discusses the impetus for change within Hong Kong as well as the institution, itself, and the relationship of these changes to broader currents in global higher education. The methodology for understanding the

assessment change elements is then presented; focusing both on the method of professional development and the method for researching and understanding the professional development initiative. The framework of the resulting analysis of data is explained, results of analysis are presented, and then a discussion of the results is placed within the context of relevant research and literature. Finally, conclusions are drawn in terms of an enhanced understanding of the problem space.

SETTING/CONTEXT:

Hong Kong is undergoing significant changes in tertiary learning. These include an emphasis in the tertiary sector on enhanced teaching learning and assessment, as well as programmatic structural changes that demand new pedagogical and assessment approaches. While embracing scholarship of teaching, learning and assessment, the University Grants Committee has chosen to look specifically at outcome-based procedures as a means to achieving change in higher education.

The institution in question is a tertiary educational provider. As Nicol and Draper (2009) point out, a unifying vision is necessary for professional development. In this case, the institution is influenced by several interlocking visions. At the institutional level, the institution to transition to university status. Part of this involves enhancing teaching, learning and assessment to bring them into greater alignment with international and local standards associated with the title.

As a response, the institution developed a primary professional development unit. The unit designed its mission to plug into scholarship of teaching, learning and assessment as a principal endeavor, while maintaining some of the principles of OBL. This was done in part to make a direct beneficial connection between institutional practice and the larger field of research. This was also done to distance the unit and its mission from some of the more harsh criticisms of Outcome based approaches (e.g. Berlach, 2004; 2007) and those specifically in higher education (Scott, 2011).

At the institutional level, though prior research had identified and been disseminated regarding concerns with instructor classroom assessment practices (Carless, 2006). Therefore the professional development initiative, while intending to address a number of related TLAP areas, was, perhaps most concerned with addressing issues with assessment. A principle issue was related to feedback. SET results as well as funded research projects revealed some dissatisfaction on students' part with assessment and more specifically feedback results.

METHODOLOGY:

Our initial investigation was survey-based; a Survey of 672 students and 35 instructors across 12 departments using custom-build evaluation instrument was deployed and both factor analysis and ANOVA were conducted. Initial results were rich; however two results stood out. The first, from factor analysis clearly indicated that assessment was s separate and acknowledged construct that students and staff were responding two. These second derived specifically from the descriptive statistics as well as T-testing revealed that it was this construct, assessment in which the greatest discrepancy existed between student and instructor scores. Specifically, students rated this lowest construct out of the entire learning experience, while instructors consistently rated this the highest. Due to the significant discrepancy but equally significant difference in sample size, this warranted further investigation of instructor responses. It was deemed appropriate then to begin an

analysis of all materials surrounding assessment as a change feature of the professional development initiative.

Participants:

Participants in this phase consisted of the 35 instructors across 12 departments, and the six developers. Instructors taught across a broad range of subjects; ranging from teacher education within particular disciplines to other fields including social sciences and ecology studies.

Data collection:

Data collection was achieved through multiple streams: formal presentations, participant sharing sessions, department meetings, smaller scale meetings between developers and participants, and institutional documents that were important to the assessment change process.

Formal presentations consisted of institution-level sessions in which participants in the change initiative were invited to give a formal report on their progress to the rest of the community. These were formal activities in a lecture hall in which individuals would get on stage, typically with an accompanying PowerPoint and proceed to explain the process of change that they were engaged in.

Sharing sessions served a dual purpose; they were part of the research design, in that they provided insight into instructors' perceptions of the professional development process and their course. However, these were also opportunities for staff to share strategies, strengths and challenges with each other and receive peer feedback and support. These were articulated according to principles of a semi-structured focus group model (Morgan, 1997). Sharing sessions consisted of formal gatherings of the involved change agents. During these sessions, the participating 35 instructors, the professional developers and related administrators would gather for a 60-90 minute session to discuss progress. These were less formal than the formal presentations, but they still focused on presenting progress, with more of a focus on questions, answers and feedback along all the participants, including the developers and administrators.

Meetings between developers and individual instructors or course teams took place at multiple points in the change process. There were initial planning meetings, progress and support meetings and finally reflection and evaluation meetings. Some notes were included as well that were from meetings of the professional development team.

Institutional documents included policy documents that impacted the assessment change process; these included policy documents, departmental rules and regulations, as well as position papers and FAQs on the change process, generally and on the assessment aspects of the change process, specifically.

Analytical procedure:

Qualitative was analyzed using an inductive coding procedure, adapted from qualitative analysis protocols established by Huberman and Miles (2002)

1. Analytical precepts were shaped by elements of the conceptual framework established by prior research into the relevant areas. Initial analysis and a priori assignation of codes and code definitions (e.g. subject-oriented, relational, activity) will be conducted.

2. Codes and code definitions were then revised and enhanced based on the emergence of observable data patterns and an evolving understanding of the phenomena under study.
3. Relative code sizes and relationships were verified, and out of this a robust coding structure is presented

Results of Analysis:

Coding results

Dialogue streams	**Within the streams**
Public: Institution-level ***Ex: Position and policy papers, performative presentations***	**Affirming** **Transformational, but "everyone is a winner"** **Overtly resistant**
Semi-public ***Ex: sharing sessions, departmental meetings***	**Affirming** **Transformational** **Overtly resistant** **Covertly resistant (e.g. "I'm not allowed")**
Semi-private ***Ex: course team sessions, "coffee corner convos"***	**Transformational** **Covertly resistant** **Overtly resistant**

Analysis of the materials suggest that there were layers to the dialogue that may be separated into three strata. Within each of these strata, dialogue was engaged with in 3-4 major ways.

Public level

The public level constitutes institute wide and external dialogue. So, it is large scale, often uni-directional dialogue intended to promote and affirm policy, such as public forums, institution-level policy documents intended for public consumption, and statements by key, high-level stakeholders.

Affirming: this consisted largely of dialogue that reinforced the mission or objectives of the professional enhancement, as exemplified by Jerry, one of the participating instructors discussing the alignment of instruction and assessment: "instruction supports varied, meaningful, authentic assessments that instill collaboration, critical thinking, exploration, and autonomy." As seen in this quote, it was not necessarily the report of actual change, as much as it was the validation more generally of the attempt to make the change.

Transformational (but everyone a winner): This was a more evidentiary stream of dialogue than the affirming stream. Transformation, while often seen in wholly positive terms has the capability of transforming in a negative sense as well. However, at this level, the actual dialogues were largely about showcasing success. There was a notable absence of discussing challenges and obstacles.

Overt resistance: for the most part, people who were doing this were high level intellectual stakeholders, specifically professors and chair professors. During the large-scale sessions, such individuals would challenge the framework decisions, such as the outcome-based context or the tenets of assessment transformation.

Semi-public level

This is the layer most closely associated with the meso layer, in which dialogue emerged during and through interactions with workgroups, and departments.

Affirmation was present here as well; this especially seemed to manifest during meeting with members who held overt or covert power positions.

Overt resistance. Like the public level; this was a counterpoint to affirmation in that it emerged philosophically. In one particularly dramatic occasion, a department head who was also a chair professor recently come over from another tertiary institution spoke up at the beginning of a department meeting with developers and loudly declared in reference to the proposed changes, "I watched this destroy Alpha University!"

Transformational: there was evidence of change in alignment with the intended change as Helen explained in one of the sharing sessions: "In the past, I gave students tests and written work to do. The written work is simply a topic, like 'explain…..' Now, I integrated authentic context and situation into written tasks."

However, transformational dialogue at this level also contained elements of difficulty, challenge and even frustrations, as Jennifer discusses in the context of her assessment initiative to explore some more complex, multi-media enhanced assessment activities: "I spent a tremendous amount of time uploading students' performance video clips online and providing individual feedback"

What emerged as new at this level was covert resistance. Most compelling example was "we are not allowed;" this emerged around department level teaching and learning guidelines and structures that had been developed several years prior to handle the development of the learning experiences at a departmental level. Staff would report in group, team and (especially) department meetings that they could not adopt assessment

changes at that time, because certain administrative procedures had to be followed, including submission of particular change requests to particular departmental committees according to a fixed semester by semester timetable. The most common comment was along these lines: “assessment changes have to be approved through the department teaching and learning committees.” As this timetable of these committees was not aligned to the professional development timetable, it was described as unlikely that assessment changes could be initiated within the context of the exercise.

It became evident, in examining the department-level documents that this was not an accurate account so much as an interpretation that allowed departments to resist making particular changes. Even more interestingly, the nature of the document and procedure could be interpreted as to prevent a host of changes, such as reconstructing course outcomes. However, within the broad scope of the professional development initiative, it was specifically, consistently, and almost exclusively interpreted to stymie change in assessment but not within other areas.

Semi private level

This level was the closest to a professional development approach of working with individuals and small groups. Developers would meet with course co-instructors or individual instructors and administrators.

Transformational: As with the semi-public level, individuals exhibited both positive discussions as well as greater degree of sharing frustrations and difficulties that emerged around the process of transformation. In some cases at this level, there was a visible discussion of the absence of transformation. That is, people indicated where they were expecting change but did not find it. This in turn led to a formative dialogue between developers and participants, centering on an inquiry into absence of change and how best to address this. This can best be represented not as a snapshot of change, but rather a process, as exemplified by the implied transformation across three meetings with one of the participants, Jason: “I am really struggling with this” …six weeks later “we are trying this now and I’m getting feedback” …post-semester “it’s totally changed the class.”

Overt resistance: In some cases, people were frank in their opposition to achieving change. There was philosophical opposition regarding the underlying precepts of change, but there was also dialogue around this and debate; something that was notably absent in overt resistance dialogue at other levels. As one participant succinctly put it, “You don’t understand how busy I am!”

Covert resistance. This manifested at the semi-private level as well. Dialogues emerged where individuals and co-instructors indicated their inability to change assessment practices due to departmental structures. Interestingly, this occurred much less at this level and when challenged, individuals and small groups seemed less invested in the resistance.

In instances where covert resistance prevailed, it may be that whatever associations we formed were eclipsed by existing demands of the individual's networks, workgroup or department.

Affirming was notably absent at this level. In no particular recorded instance did anyone at this level reinforce the mission or objectives. Instead, there was a focus on transformation within the context of the individual's assessment practices.

Discussion:

The "take away" from this research is that dialogue in assessment change is complex, multi-layered; it matters that we understand this. Understanding dialogue in this way may allow us to be privy to the hidden conceptions, understandings and culture surrounding assessment.

Equally important is the understanding that scale isn't everything: small scale conversations and relationship-building matters. However, achieving scale changes is desirable, even necessary; so, the idea of forming relationships should lead to larger scale change. To do this, though would require an institution at all cultural layers to support that change and do so in a way that is, from multiple cultural layers desirable or at lease permissible.

In one sense, we as developers became an informal network with individual instructors but, this also had the potential to challenging existing networks and the conceptions and dispositions. This was a general issue but it really cropped up with assessment. Why? While it is true that conceptions and dispositions color all elements of academic life, there is compelling evidence to suggest that assessment is an area where these may have extraordinary power. Therefore, it should not be too surprising that the dialogues and the structures behind those dialogs remain more resistant and even more creatively resistant in the form of covert/misdirection. Moreover, at the meso-layer, this kind of dialogue may reveal a covert culture of resistance, entrenched in the meso-layer.

One interesting difference between those who experienced transformation and those who did not is that in at least one case, the participant was coming from a department with a highly supportive head who not only encouraged departmental sessions, but attended them as well. He is a chair and a head. And has real intellectual power. It was clear in at least this case, we were not challenging preconceptions or covert power structures.

When resistance to assessment change enters the dialogue, we may even see it as an ecologically rational response to a more profound set of issues that are within the developer's capacity to change, even if those issues are closely related to assessment or other related enhancements.

Have we succeeded? It is too easy to rely on a public layer of discourse; if an institution sees itself as simply externally complying; there may be strong incentive to just do this. Understanding and challenging conceptions and practices requires more. We must tap into the meso layer; we know it to be a key structure in function; we need to start understanding it as a key structure in dialogue as it is a phase boundary between the semi-private and public

We cannot become slaves to scale; as this will lead us both as researchers and developers away from the smaller scale semi-private layer. This is the layer of trust and relationship building though. While it may not be an easy layer upon which to build scale,

it is the layer where trust and relationship may be built; therefore it is essential to change initiatives and to understanding those change initiatives.

Conclusion:

As the anticipated career long and lifelong activities of students increase in sophistication, so too must the preparatory educational experiences rise to meet this. While this has been occurring, albeit gradually in increasingly sophisticated learning experiences, assessment in higher education has not been keeping up. We might truly call this the assessment gap; why it has been occurring may be in part traced to the same challenges in enhancement in higher education, but with greater problems. Some problems are specific to assessment. However, we must also look to the crucial role of dialogue and what it may tell us. Just as any change initiative exists differently at different layers in an institution, so too does the dialogue around those changes exist.

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